

Clinical indicators of occult musculoskeletal pain in aggressive dogs

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Context

There is a lack of information based on clinical data to guide clinical judgement in identifying cases where aggressive canine behaviour could be related to pain. This study aimed to identify clinical themes in cases of aggressive behaviour by dogs in which a relevant painful focus was identified versus a control group with similar initial presenting problems, in which no medical complications were identified.

Main conclusion

Dogs in pain are often described as 'moody', and appear to be aggressive for defensive reasons against a range of targets, typically inflicting a low level of damage. By contrast the worst bites inflicted by the non-medical cases behaviour referred tend to be more severe in both location and intensity of the bite.

Approach

The text of 11 behaviour consultations relating to dogs exhibiting aggressive behaviour while experiencing musculoskeletal pain was compared to that of 11 control subjects in which the aggression had no apparent medical involvement. Data were tabulated according to a range of predefined features and qualitative textual analysis was used to identify the prevalence of certain themes in the case files.

Results

Subjects with a painful focus were often described as having inflicted bites to limb extremities, and when the dog was lying down and/or when people approached. The most severe incidents were of short duration and not difficult to interrupt and these dogs were often described as showing a reluctance to move and having a poor temperament. With the exception of the unpredictability of incidents and aggression occurring while lying down, these were not strong themes among the control cases. Control dog histories showed these additional themes: the bite history involved more serious bites and more sustained attacks that were difficult for owners to interrupt, with no mention of these dogs being reluctant to move.

Interpretation

The results from this analysis should not be taken as pathognomic nor definitive, but should be used to provide the basis for further exploration of cases of aggressive behaviour in dogs at both the clinical and scientific level.

Significance of findings

These observations suggest features of aggressive dogs that indicate the need for closer veterinary evaluation, before considering a purely behavioural approach to management.

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